

A RESPONSE TO MARINACCIO'S "LANGUAGE, PLACE, AND TAIWAN'S POPULAR DISCOURSE ON TUVALU"

Niuone Eliuta

Independent Researcher

Introduction

The Tuvaluan word for friendship is *taugasoa*, a term around which Tuvalu's relationship with Taiwan, one of Tuvalu's most long-term, trusted, and well-recognized diplomatic allies, has been framed. One of the most important practices in Tuvaluan culture is caring for *fakaalofa* (people who live in Tuvalu but who are not from Tuvalu or do not own land there).¹ The principle of *fakaalofa* is a means of developing lifelong *taugasoa* relationships, and it is now reflected in how Tuvaluans care for the government and people of Taiwan. Tuvaluans have always seen Taiwanese diplomats or volunteers who live in Tuvalu as *fakaalofa* because they are landless foreigners. Owing to the extreme concern accorded to these Taiwanese citizens because of their *fakaalofa* status, Tuvalu's appreciation of the relationship between the two nations has grown stronger over the years, and Taiwan is considered a true *taugasoa* for Tuvalu. Moreover, *fakaalofa* and *taugasoa* are deeply rooted in Tuvaluan culture and ways of life; they are also associated with other terms related to Tuvaluan culture and Tuvalu's Christian faith such as *alofa* (love) and *faimeatonu* (honesty). Over the years, these terms have also come to encompass and promote the Tuvalu-Taiwan *taugasoa*.

As is widely known, Tuvalu is highly vulnerable and exposed to the impacts of climate change and sea-level rise because of its geographic location and size. Furthermore, these climatic threats are rendered more severe due to Tuvalu's

socio-economic status. As a true taugasoa, Taiwan has assisted Tuvalu with these issues through financial support and the provision of other resources so that Tuvaluans can better adapt to their environmental and socio-economic circumstances.

Marinaccio (this issue) discusses some problematic aspects of Taiwanese discourse, especially the disturbing manner in which some Taiwanese people portray Tuvalu and its predicament with regard to climate change and sea-level rise (Marinaccio 2019). Although this information is readily available, it is written in Mandarin/Hokkien, which makes it impossible for many Tuvaluans to understand. From a Tuvaluan viewpoint, the information revealed in Marinaccio's piece is like a new discovery because of language barriers separating Tuvalu and Taiwan. In Tuvalu, as is the case in many Pacific Islands, only native and English languages are widely spoken and only an extremely limited number of Tuvaluans understand Mandarin.

My response outlines my views on the Tuvalu-Taiwan relationship before and after reading Taiwan's Mandarin-language discourse as described by Marinaccio. It is worth noting that, although the response represents my personal perspectives, I believe that many Tuvaluans would share the same reaction I had if they could access or understand the information Marinaccio presents. As an ally, Taiwan must urgently address this issue to reduce potential future complications in the Tuvalu-Taiwan relationship. However, I also feel that Tuvalu must enhance its own national policies to safeguard and prevent similar discourses from developing in other countries.

This response is divided into four main sections. The section "A Brief Overview of Tuvalu-Taiwan Diplomatic Ties" briefly discusses the diplomatic relationship between Tuvalu and Taiwan, capturing major highlights in this relationship over the years. The section "Perspectives on Taiwanese Discourse on Tuvalu and Climate Change" outlines Taiwanese discourse on Tuvalu, mainly focusing on my personal reactions to this discourse. It also provides evidence that shows why this discourse conflicts with unique aspects of Tuvaluan ways of life, demonstrating why I claim to be able to represent the reaction most Tuvaluans would have to Taiwanese discourse. The conclusion provides suggestions on how to avoid the development of similar discourses in the future.

A Brief Overview of Tuvalu-Taiwan Diplomatic Ties

The Tuvalu-Taiwan diplomatic friendship, or taugasoa, dates back to 1979, shortly after Tuvalu gained independence in 1978 (*United Daily News* 1979). This makes Taiwan one of Tuvalu's most long-term allies. In 1998, Taiwan established its diplomatic mission in Tuvalu's capital Funafuti (Embassy of the Republic of China [Taiwan] in Tuvalu Website 2019), while Tuvalu opened

its mission in Taipei in 2013 (*Radio New Zealand* 2013). Additionally, Taiwan has been pivotal to Tuvalu's development since Tuvalu became independent. The alliance between the two countries is so strong because many Tuvaluans consider Taiwan a true friend or taugasoa. Over the years, Taiwan's aid programs in Tuvalu have been immeasurable and have touched every corner of the nation. Taiwan also makes annual grants to the government of Tuvalu's budget, and the contributions Taiwan made during Tuvalu's preparations for the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) meeting were exceptional (Ministry of Finance, Government of Tuvalu 2019). This was not the first instance in which Taiwan supported Tuvalu during difficult times either; Taiwan also donated US\$61,000 to assist Tuvalu after it was devastated by Tropical Cyclone Pam in 2015 (*Taiwan News* 2015). Similarly, despite its financial instability, Tuvalu donated US\$210,000 to assist Taiwan in its recovery effort after Typhoon Morakot in 2009 (*Taiwan News* 2013). This act of kindness is a reflection of the friendship shared between the two countries; it directly corresponds to the Tuvaluan way of life and the true meaning of taugasoa.

Perspectives on Taiwanese Discourse on Tuvalu and Climate Change

The boundless support Tuvalu provides to Taiwan is widely recognized by many Tuvaluans. Consequently, Tuvaluans tend to think of the Taiwanese government and people as friendly and honest because of the credibility Taiwan has shown over the years. Previously, I had always praised Taiwan for its generosity to Tuvalu. However, Marinaccio's piece (this issue) presents Taiwanese discourse on Tuvalu that would never have crossed my mind and that may change how Tuvaluans think of their relationship with Taiwan. As Marinaccio explains, this negative discourse is motivated by socio-political pressures, including Taiwan's lack of sovereignty because of its contentious relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its current quest to become a full member of the United Nations (UN). I felt betrayed by the perceptions of Tuvalu by Taiwan, which has been influenced by pressure from the PRC and the UN, presented by Marinaccio, and I feel confident that any Tuvaluan would have the same reaction.

Furthermore, it was painful to read the information in Marinaccio's article because the ideas she translates were originally published in Mandarin, which is not a readily accessible language for most Tuvaluans. The negative discourse is completely at odds with the Tuvaluan custom of taugasoa, which carries with it a mixture of love, honesty, and loyalty. This concept is deeply embedded in all Tuvaluan families as part of our culture and Christian values. Below, I provide my personal opinions first on the language barrier between Tuvalu and Taiwan, which has largely obscured Taiwanese discourse on Tuvalu from the Tuvaluan

population (Marinaccio 2019). Second, I outline my views on the concept of merging Tuvalu and Taiwan as suggested by Huang (2017) and Lai (2007) and described in Marinaccio's article. Finally, I explain how Taiwanese discourse contradicts Tuvaluan ways of life.

Given Tuvalu's small size, diplomats and other representatives from Taiwan who have lived in the country are fully aware that no one in Tuvalu speaks Mandarin fluently and that only a few students who have previously studied in Taiwan have some understanding of the Mandarin language. From a Tuvaluan perspective, using Mandarin to criticize the socio-economic status of Tuvalu and its association with climate change is undiplomatic and concerning. It is shocking that Taiwan uses phrases like "black, poor and small" to describe Tuvalu and Taiwan's other allies (Marinaccio, this issue). To me, reading this discourse was highly confusing because Taiwan has done many good deeds for Tuvalu over the years. Yet, at the same time, Taiwanese people have been criticizing Tuvalu in a language that is not easily accessible to Tuvaluans. The tone and content of this discourse may be unintentional because the general Taiwanese population lacks information about Tuvalu, but the Taiwanese government is fully aware of how the general population reacts and responds to allies as discussed by Marinaccio (this issue). This shows how Taiwan's government has failed to counter negative discourse. It would be unacceptable to any Tuvaluan to learn that Taiwan's media only recognizes Tuvalu as a country associated with climate change and a nation that will soon be unfit for human habitation (Wang 2009). If Taiwan fails to address this discourse, it might even become a national issue for Tuvalu, which would potentially put pressure on the Tuvaluan government and Tuvaluan politicians to reduce or eliminate Taiwan's presence in the country, especially if Taiwan believes that its allies are low quality and need improvement compared with PRC allies.

As captured by Marinaccio, Lai (2007) has suggested that Taiwan can easily solve its sovereignty issues vis-à-vis the PRC and gain membership in the UN by merging with Tuvalu. This suggestion shows that Taiwanese people hold Tuvalu in low regard, seeing it as defined by climate change, low socio-economic status, and a need for assistance. Tuvaluans are very proud of how far we have come since independence; therefore, Taiwanese views contradict the interests of all Tuvaluans and the pioneer leaders who fought for Tuvalu's freedom. I would rather live and adapt to climate change than merge with a country that is not only far away from Tuvalu but that also possesses a different culture, which may jeopardize unique Tuvaluan ways of life. An important question that all Tuvaluans must ask is "if Taiwan's current socio-political and international status improved vis-à-vis the PRC, would its ardent support of Tuvalu change as well?" I feel that Taiwan is using its allies to an excessive extent to advance its international position and decrease pressure from the PRC.

In the introduction, I briefly mentioned that Taiwan's negative discourse on Tuvalu and climate change is alarming because it violates Tuvaluan ways of life, primarily the taugasoa and fakaalofa concepts. Taugasoa is a customary cultural concept that every Tuvaluan embraces and nurtures with dignity; it involves giving and sharing between families and neighbors. This customary practice developed from the *fale-pili* concept, which was adopted to overcome the limited land space available in Tuvalu. *Fale-pili* simply means that, in Tuvalu, houses are built very close to each other, and, hence, the sharing of goods between households is common (Falefou 2017). For example, families share their food with neighbors, and, when they give, they give wholeheartedly. Similarly, in the outer islands, a family with a male member will typically share their *kaleve* (toddy) or *ika* (fish) with their neighbors who do not have a male in the family. Falefou (2017) has termed this process *kaiga seai ne tagata* (families without a male). This way of life is deeply embedded in all Tuvaluans and is a core cultural value that strengthens trust and true friendships, or taugasoa, between families and neighbors. Moreover, the taugasoa and *fale-pili* concepts grow stronger when there is a fakaalofa on an island. Under the *fale-pili* concept, when a fakaalofa lives on an island, the people of the island, especially those living near the landless person, will exert extra effort to provide for that person because it is the island's responsibility to look after her/him.

Therefore, the information translated and presented in Marinaccio's article certainly undermines Taiwan's presence in Tuvalu as a fakaalofa, as well as its general status as a taugasoa, regardless of the good deeds Taiwan has accomplished for Tuvalu over the years. The discourse Marinaccio describes flies in the face of a number of Tuvalu's most valued customs.

Conclusion

It is saddening to learn that the friendship between Tuvalu and Taiwan has lasted for forty years but Tuvalu is only known to Taiwan as a country that will disappear in the coming decades because of climate change. Understandably, the ongoing sovereignty pressures Taiwan faces from the PRC drive these political discourses, but the fact that they are not accessible to Tuvaluans is problematic. These discourses made me feel exploited, and I am sure any Tuvaluan would feel the same. Taiwanese discussions on Tuvalu seem to run counter to valued Tuvaluan ideas of taugasoa, fakaalofa, and *fale-pili*. This is an indication of a failure on the part of the Taiwanese government to prevent these negative discussions from developing. Particularly, it represents a failure by Taiwan to promote allies as not only affected by climate change but also as liveable and safe places. This failure could potentially be overcome by showing Taiwanese people the beautiful beaches and blue lagoons of Tuvalu as portrayed by Tuvaluan children in Yamamoto's (2008) illustrated book (see Marinaccio, this issue) rather than simply showing images of

Tuvalu as affected by climate change. These initiatives would not only highlight Tuvalu as a liveable place but would also promote tourism.

I fully agree with Marinaccio's conclusion about Taiwan's inability to foster "critical awareness" of Tuvalu or appreciate Tuvalu as an inhabited environment (see Case 2019, 18). I believe developing more robust awareness policies will strengthen and harmonize not only Tuvalu-Taiwan diplomatic ties but also their different cultural settings. Additionally, given the language gap between Tuvalu and Taiwan, Tuvalu must recognize the importance of learning the Mandarin language, an initiative which could be used to monitor the kind of discourse Taiwan espouses. Moreover, Tuvaluan policies on foreign media, especially non-English-language media, must be strengthened, and media must be scrutinized to identify reporting that denigrates or misrepresents Tuvalu.

Because the Taiwanese discourse presented in Marinaccio's article controversies Tuvaluan ways of life and cultural concepts, particularly the idea of taugasoa, the Taiwanese government must urgently address this issue before it becomes a national matter in Tuvalu. It is quite upsetting that the Tuvalu government has recognized Taiwan's sovereignty and its many forms of assistance over the years, while Taiwan sees Tuvalu's sovereignty as a political avenue to gain independence and access to the UN. Tuvalu will forever participate in climate change negotiations, but it will never bring detriment to its sovereignty for any reason.

NOTES

1. For example, if a woman from the Tuvaluan island of Nanumaga marries a man from the island Nukufetau and they live on Nukufetau, the woman would be called a fakaalofa, and the people of Nukufetau would be responsible for looking after her. A fakaalofa has special privileges in any community as local people show her/him more respect than they do to others.

REFERENCES

Case, Emalani

- 2019 Love of place: Towards a critical Pacific studies pedagogy. Paper presented at the 2019 Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania Meeting, Auckland, University of Auckland, February 12–16, 2019.

Embassy of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in Tuvalu Website

- 2019 Dashiguan jianjie [Introduction to the Embassy]. <https://www.taiwanembassy.org/tv/post/11.html> [accessed September 2, 2019].

Falefou, Tapugao

- 2017 TOKU TIA: Tuvalu and the impacts of climate change. PhD thesis, Univ. of Waikato.

Huang, Chong-Kai

- 2017 Untitled. In *Zimuhui F xugou [F comme Fiction]*, ed. R. Zhuang, 31–43. New Taipei City: Acropolis.

Lai, Youzhe

- 2007 Tuvalu de naojinji zhuanwan/taiwan huoke jieke shangshi [Tuvalu Brain Teaser/Can Taiwan Engineer a Reverse Merger Takeover]. *Liberty Times*, 21 March. <http://talk.ltn.com.tw/article/paper/121291> [accessed April 18, 2020].

Marinaccio, Jess

- 2019 Rethinking Diplomacy and Its Cultural, Social, and Political Contexts: The Diplomacies of Tuvalu, the Pacific, and Taiwan. *Taiwan Insight*, 16 April. <https://taiwaninsight.org/2019/04/16/rethinking-diplomacy-and-its-cultural-social-and-political-contexts-the-diplomacies-of-tuvalu-the-pacific-and-taiwan/> [accessed September 2, 2019].
- 2020 “Taiwan’s ally Tuvalu to soon become a water world”: Language, place, and Taiwan’s popular discourse on Tuvalu. *Pacific Studies* 43 (2): 162–83.

Ministry of Finance, Government of Tuvalu

- 2019 Government of Tuvalu 2020 National Budget. Funafuti: Government of Tuvalu.

Radio New Zealand

- 2013 Tuvalu Opens Embassy in Taipei. 11 March. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/210749/tuvalu-opens-embassy-in-taipei> [accessed September 9, 2019].

Taiwan News

- 2013 President thanks Tuvalu for typhoon relief aid in 2009. 5 November. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/2338748> [accessed August 21, 2019].
- 2015 Taiwan donates US\$61,000 to cyclone-hit Tuvalu. 17 March. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/2705152> [accessed August 19, 2019].

United Daily News

- 1979 Woguo yu tuvalu jianjiao, gaozheng jian tuvalu dashi [Taiwan and Tuvalu Establish Diplomatic Relations, Gao Zheng Becomes Ambassador to Tuvalu]. September 20, p. 2.

Wang, Guangci

- 2009 Tuvalu kaijuan 690wan [Tuvalu Generously Donates NT\$6,900,000]. *United Daily News*, 26 August, A4.

Yamamoto, Toshiharu

- 2008 Rijian chenmo de leyuan tuvalu: Ni zuizhongyao de dongxi shi shenme? Diqu nuanhua pian [Tuvalu, The Island Nation Sinking Because of Global Warming—The Most Important Thing for You]. Translated by Miya. Taipei: CommonWealth Magazine Company.